

The Letter of Bruno of Querfurt to King Henry II: On His Alliance with the Pagans¹

Translated by W.L. North from the edition and notes of H. Karwasinska, Monumenta Poloniae Historica series nova, t.IV:3, Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1973, pp. 97-106.

To King Henry,² a pious man of the church, Bruno,³ who is nothing but a wretch, sends whatever befits a king and pleases the Lord God Who judges all things.

May you, O religious king, know without a doubt: there is no one living on earth who desires your salvation according to God and wishes for your honor according to this toilsome world more than I. Your brother, the especially beloved bishop Bruno,⁴ said to me while I was staying in the land of Hungarians,⁵ that you, O king, had a pious concern about me and very much feared that I wished to perish. Of course, I would have gone to my death and would do this still, if the merciful God and my most holy

¹ On the basis of Bruno's remark that he was now intending to go on a mission to the Prussians, this letter should probably be dated to late 1008 or early 1009.

² Henry II (978-1024), grandnephew of Otto I, came to the throne on 7 June 1002, after the death of Otto III in January of that year. He was later crowned emperor on 14 February 1014, and ruled until his death on 13 July 1024.

³ Born from an excellent family and educated at the cathedral school at Magdeburg, Bruno was initially received into the retinue of the emperor Otto III. Leaving the emperor, Bruno went away to lead the solitary life. Bruno sought episcopal office in 1004 from Henry, bishop of Merseburg, and received his consecration from the hands of Archbishop Tagino of Magdeburg. Cf. Thietmar of Merseburg, Chronicon, MGH SRG n.s. 9, VI.94 (58). He spent the remainder of his life (until 1009) involved in missionary efforts to the Slavs and was martyred while on a mission to the Prussians.

⁴ Bruno (d.1029) was the younger brother of Henry II and Gisela, wife of King Stephen of Hungary. In May 1003, he was found to have conspired with Henry, margrave of Schweinfurt, and Boleslav, duke of Bohemia; he fled to Bohemia, then to Hungary. There, sometime early in 1004, he was received back into King Henry's favor, at the intercession of his brother-in-law King Stephen, and in May of that year received the episcopacy of Augsburg. (See Thietmar of Merseburg, Chronicon, MGH SRG n.s. 9, V.32 (20) & 38 (23), VI.2 (2), 3 (3)).

⁵ Bruno is thought to have been in Hungary at this time (autumn 1007) to encourage King Stephen to attack Boleslav the Great, leader of the Poles. The editor also believes it possible that Bruno was in Hungary to discourage Bruno of Querfurt's efforts on behalf of Boleslav and to encourage him to return to Germany. No direct evidence either supports or refutes this hypothesis.

lord (*senior*) Peter⁶ had not prohibited it, just as they forbid it still. May God grant you merit in the land of the living,⁷ because you, O outstanding king, who must care for almost the entire world, have deigned in the name of the Lord to have a noble concern for me, the least of your servants, lest I perish. Thanks be to God that while you are king, you have zeal according to the wisdom which God has given to you, in order that you may be a good and catholic rector as well as the pious and active charioteer of the holy church and the sort [of leader] it needs to have. Likewise, as long as the mercy alone of the Holy Spirit inspires us to work, we wretched men of yours shall devote our zeal to toil lest we consume this life in vain and be found naked on the day of death,⁸ in accordance with that saying of Paul, best of men: *I do not make my soul more precious than myself.*⁹ Hence, as far as I am concerned, I do nothing but evil; but as far as God is concerned, He does everything good by His word, swiftly and wherever He wishes. It is honorable to reveal and to confess the works of God; and I, who bear the gospel of Christ from Saint Peter to the nations, should especially not be silent to you, at whose holy persuasion I am a bishop.

Certainly, an entire year has now fulfilled its days and months since we left the Hungarians, where we stayed for a long time though to no purpose, and set off for the Petchenegs, the cruelest of all pagans.¹⁰ The lord of the Rus',¹¹ a man great in his reign and wealth, kept me for one month, and striving against my will, he argued with me, as if I was someone who wanted to destroy myself voluntarily, that I not go to such an irrational nation, where I would find no profit in souls, but only death, and that of the foulest kind. But when he was unable to convince me and a certain vision about unworthy me terrified him, he himself along with his army took me two days journey to the farthest boundary of his kingdom, which he had enclosed on all sides with the longest and most solid of fences because of the roving enemy. He leapt from his horse

⁶ i.e. St. Peter the Apostle.

⁷ "Land of the living" is an expression referring to heaven derived from Psalms 26:13, 51:7, and 141:6.

⁸ Cf. II Corinthians 5:3.

⁹ Acts 20:24.

¹⁰ The Petchenegs were a nomadic people living between the Don and the Danube rivers; their northern boundary seems to have been not far from Kiev.

¹¹ Vladimir, prince of Kiev (972-1015). For a general account of Vladimir's rule see G. Vernadsky, Kievan Russia, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), pp.56-74.

to the ground, and as I went on ahead with my companions, he followed with his magnates. We then went out through the gate. He stood on one hill, we stood on another; clasping the cross in my hands, I bore it forth, singing a noble song: *Peter, if you love me, tend my sheep.*"¹² When the responsory had ended, the lord sent one of his magnates to us with these words: "I have brought you to where my land ends, and the land of the enemy begins; I ask, for God's sake, that you not lose your young life to my dishonor; I know that tomorrow, before the third hour, you shall taste a bitter death, without profit, without reason." I responded: "May God open paradise for you just as you have opened the way to the pagans for us!"

What more can I say? We travelled for two days without anyone doing us harm; on the third day, which was the sixth day of the week, we were all led forth to our death with bowed necks on three occasions - morning, midday, and at nones;¹³ but on each occasion, we emerged unharmed from the enemies who were attacking us by a marvelous sign — just as God and our leader Peter had said. On Sunday, we came to the greater population and were given a place to live until the entire people was gathered for a council by running messengers. Then, at nones on another Sunday, we were summoned to the council; we and our horses were whipped; innumerable commoners with blood-stained eyes fell upon us and raised a horrible clamor; with a thousand axes and a thousand swords unsheathed over our necks, they vainly threatened to cut us to pieces. After being dragged to a different area, we were vexed until nightfall, when the magnates of the land, who snatched us from their hands in a fight, recognized (being wise men) that we came into their land for the sake of something good, once they heard our explanation. Thus, just as the marvelous God and most precious Peter ordered, we stayed among this people for five months and travelled around three parts of their land, though we did not touch the fourth; from this region, however, messengers of the more noble people (*meliores*) came to us. When Christianity had been made in around thirty souls by the finger of God, we made a peace which, as they said, no one could have accomplished except us: "This peace," they said, "happened through you; if it remains firm, as you teach, we shall all freely be Christians; but if that lord of the Rus' wavers in his faith, we must think only of war, not of Christianity." With this arrangement I came to the lord of the Rus', who, giving

¹² Jn.21:15-17. The Polish scholar V. Meysztowicz, "Szkice o sw. Brunonie-Bonifacym," in *Sacrum Poloniae Millenium*, V, (1958), observed that this passage is found in the liturgical texts for 22 February on the festival of the see of St. Peter. If Bruno was, in fact, using the appropriate liturgical texts as he left the kingdom of Kiev (and he seems to be singularly conscious of liturgical time throughout this account), then Bruno and his companions would have left the Vladimir's realm on 22 February 1008.

¹³ Literally, the ninth hour of the day. It also was one of the canonical hours.

satisfaction for God's sake, offered his son as a hostage,¹⁴ and we consecrated one of our number as bishop, whom the lord of the Rus' placed with his son in the midst of the land; and so, among the worst and cruelest of all the pagans who are on the face of the earth the Christian law was achieved to the greater glory and praise of God the Savior.

I am now heading towards the Prussians. There, merciful God and my most precious lord Peter, who have advanced and have done all the things mentioned above, must now continue to advance and do things like them.

Regarding the Black Hungarians, to whom St. Peter's legation — which never goes forth in vain — went first, I have heard that, once they were converted, all became Christians. But our men — may God pardon them — blinded some people and did so very sinfully, since all the converts became Christian. All these deeds belong to the glory of God and the most excellent Peter alone; as for me, I am nothing but sin, and all the good that has been done will be lost, if God, taking pity on us, does not do it for His own sake and increase and add to it for the sake of the blood of the saints, especially the blood of these men, which has been poured forth upon the earth in our own age.¹⁵

My lord, you have done all good things for my cause. May God pay you back in the resurrection of the just, especially because you had concern for me, lest out of some error of youth I desert things of the spirit and instead do the things of the world. That is why you seemed to be angry with me, while I was away; that is why, while I was away, you mocked me and my many laughable deeds to the heroes standing around. These three things — fear, anger, and mockery — you would have never had concerning me, and you certainly would never have viewed with hatred what seemed to you to be evil in me, if you did not love me and if you were not good. I say to you as consolation: however much holy God wishes to take pity on me, with pious Peter compelling him, I do not wish to die — I who, although foul and evil in myself, want to be good by the gift of God. I say to you as a prayer: May omnipotent and merciful God correct me, an ancient sinner, and make you a better king from day to day and a king in whom good works are never dead.

If someone has also said that I bear greater fidelity and friendship to this lord,¹⁶

¹⁴ There is no agreement among scholars on which of his sons Vladimir gave as a hostage to the Petchenegs.

¹⁵ Here Bruno seems to be referring to the martyrdoms of St. Adalbert of Prague, who was martyred in Prussia in 997, and of the Five Brothers, who were martyred in 1003.

¹⁶ I.e. Boleslav, leader of the Poles.

this is true: clearly I love him as my own soul and more than my life. But as God, from whom nothing precious is hidden, is my public witness, I do not love him against your grace, because more than I am able, I want to convert him to you. But, if it is permitted to speak thus without losing the king's grace: Is it good to persecute a Christian people and hold a pagan people in friendship? What concord hath Christ with Belial? What communion hath light with darkness? In what way can the devil Zuarasiz¹⁷ and the duke of saints, your and our Maurice,¹⁸ concur? On what battle line do the sacred lance¹⁹ and the diabolic banners (*vexilla*),²⁰ which are nourished with human blood, go forth together? Do you not think it a sin, O king, when a Christian head is sacrificed under the banner of the demons - a thing which is horrible even to say? Would it not be better to have such a person as your faithful man, with whose aid and counsel you could receive tribute and make a sacred and most Christian people from a pagan one? O how I would like to have lord Boleszlav, about whom I am speaking, as a faithful subject (*fidelis*), not an enemy. Perhaps you shall respond: I wish it, too. Then act mercifully, put aside cruelty; if you want to have him as a faithful subject (*fidelis*), cease from persecuting him; if you want to have him as a knight, act with goodness, in order that he may like you. Beware, O king, if you want to do everything with power and never with mercy, which the good man loves, lest by chance Jesus, who now helps you,

¹⁷ According to Thietmar of Merseburg (Chronicon VI. 23 (17) - 25 (18)), Zuarasiz (also known as Redigast) was the chief god among the Redarii, among other Slavic tribes. Thietmar describes the main temple of the Redarii as follows: "There is a walled enclosure (*urbs*) in the district of the Redarii called Redigost, which has three corners and three gateways in it. A venerable forest, untouched by the local inhabitants, surrounds it on all sides. Two of its doors open to all those wishing to enter; the third, which faces towards the east and is the smallest, shows the way to the sea, which is located right next to it and is horrible in appearance. In this place, there is nothing but a temple constructed with great skill from wood which is supported with the horns of different beasts for its bases. Various marvelously engraved images of gods and goddesses adorn its walls on the outside, as it seems to those looking on; on the inside, however, stand hand-made gods, each engraved with its own name and dressed in a terrifying way in helmets and chain mail, the first of whom is called Zuarasic and is honored and worshipped by all the gentiles more than the others."

¹⁸ St. Maurice was the leader of the Theban legion, a group of soldiers from Egypt who were thought to have been martyred c.287 near Lake Geneva under the emperor Maximian for refusing to sacrifice to the gods for military victory. The cult was particularly associated with eastern Saxony, since in 937 Otto I had dedicated a new monastic foundation in Magdeburg to St. Maurice and St. Innocent, whose relics were brought there.

¹⁹ The holy lance was thought to have belonged to St. Maurice, and since the time of Henry I (king of Germany 920-936) was among the royal insignia.

²⁰ According to Thietmar (Chronicon, VI. 23 (17)), the banners (*vexilla*) of the Slavic gods were not taken from their temple except at times of military campaigns.

should laugh at you in mockery. But let me not speak against the king, let it happen as God wills and you will. Would it not be better to fight with pagans for the sake of Christianity than to inflict violence on Christians for the sake of secular honor? Of course, man proposes, God disposes. Didn't the king²¹ enter this land with pagans and Christians among the forces of his kingdom? What then do you expect? Didn't Saint Peter, whose tributary he²² claimed he was, and the holy martyr Adalbert — didn't they protect him? And if these saints had not wanted to help, the five holy martyrs killed in their land, who poured out their blood and do many miracles under the power of divine terror, would never have remained quiet. My hero, you will not be a soft king, which is harmful, but a just and active rector, which is pleasing, if this alone is added, namely that you also be merciful and not always reconcile a people and make them acceptable to yourself with power, but also do so with mercy. You will appear to acquire a people more by benefit than by war, and you, who now have a war in three regions, would then not even have it in one.

But what are these things to us? Let a king, who clings to what is just and good, view these things in his wisdom, and let the best of the bishops, counts, dukes see them when they give their counsel. I will tell you what two things pertain to my, nay God's, cause, and then I shall not add anything more. Just as God and Peter began to fight amidst rude paganism, the new church had to feel two great evils near at hand. First, Lord Boleszlav, who wished most freely to aid me in converting the Prussians with all the resources of his mind and body and decreed that he would spare no expense towards this end - behold, because he is impeded by a war which the wise king wages out of necessity, he has neither the time nor the capacity to aid me in the Gospel. Second, although the Liutici²³ are pagans and worship idols, God did not put it into the heart of the king to conquer them in a glorious struggle for the sake of Christianity, that is, to compel them to come in, as the Gospel commands.²⁴ Would it not be a great honor and the great salvation of the king to increase the church and to find the name of "apostle" in the eyes of God, and to work so that the pagan might be baptized, and to offer peace to those Christians who help him to achieve this end? But every evil hangs on this region, in which the king does not have faith in Boleszlav, and Boleszlav does

²¹ Henry II.

²² Boleszlav.

²³ A pagan Slavic tribe located near the Elbe River.

²⁴ Luke 14:23: "And the lord said to the servant: Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled."

not have faith in the irate king. Alas, our unfortunate age! After the holy emperor Constantine the Great,²⁵ after Charles,²⁶ that best exemplar of religion, there is now someone who persecutes the Christian, but almost no one who converts the pagan. For this reason, O king, if you give peace to Christians in order to fight with pagans for the sake of Christianity, you will be pleased on the last day when, with all else set aside, you shall stand in the sight of the Prince with lesser sorrow and greater joy because you shall be remembered as having done greater goods. It is not true that the king fears religion and, because he is a man who recalls evils, joins himself to the pagans. Do not seek only what is impossible; for if you act otherwise, however our king²⁷ Boleszlav wills, he shall make you secure, since he must not abandon you to eternity but rather must always help you most diligently in conquering the pagans and freely serve you in all things. O how many and fitting are the goods which come together in protecting Christianity and converting paganism, if his son Boleszlav might live with you, our king, who remain as the only hope of the world, just as the father Miesco²⁸ lived with the emperor who has died.

Among these affairs, let it not escape the king's notice that, as the newly arrived messengers have reported most truly, our bishop, whom I had sent beyond the sea to the Swedes for the sake of the Gospel along with the outstanding monk Robert, whom you know, has baptized - thanks be to God - the lord of the Swedes himself, whose wife had long been a Christian.²⁹ As soon as a thousand men and seven peoples (*plebes*) received this same grace along with him, all who had hope returned again with the bishop and gave him a place for the time being, since the remaining people, who were

²⁵ Roman emperor (312-337). After his own conversion, he was the first Roman emperor to legalize Christianity. He was a great patron of the Church and participated actively in ecclesiastical affairs, including the Council of Nicaea. He later made Christianity the official state religion.

²⁶ Charles the Great, a.k.a Charlemagne, king of the the Franks (768-814) and emperor of the Romans (800-814).

²⁷ Although Boleszlav is not given any explicit title by Bruno aside from "senior" (lord) and the editor of the letter consistently refers to Boleslav in the footnotes as "dux" (duke, leader), I nevertheless think that in this passage, the king to whom Bruno refers, must be Boleszlav. The anonymous Chronicle of the Dukes or Princes of the Poles, composed in the late 11th or early 12th century, offers some support for this reading in that it also refers to Boleszlav as "king", though this entitulation may stem from the author's desire to enhance the prestige and political independence of the Polish past, and hence not represent faithfully the situation in the early 11th century.

²⁸ Miesco, leader of Poles and father of Boleszlav, (d.992).

²⁹ This mission is thought to have occurred around 1007.

unworthy, were seeking to kill him (them?). Messengers have been sent to investigate concerning their way of life (*habitus*) and their conversion, and when they return, whatever certain information they tell us, I, your servant, shall take care to send to you as to the king who has perfected me in the Gospel.

What more is there to say? Know with Christ as my witness: wherever I can, I am a most faithful supporter of your side, and although I do not know how to pray in the sight of the Lord, I shall not cease from my barking in order that the salvation of God may bless you and the good grace of our Peter may be your companion in every work. Moreover, whatever counsel or aid you can offer in converting the Liutizi and the Prussians, do not cease from giving, as befits a pious king and the hope of the world. For now, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, our efforts must be applied towards converting the hard hearts of these pagans and each man be consumed with works and zeal, as Peter fights on indefatigably.

FAREWELL, O KING; LIVE TRULY FOR GOD; BE MINDFUL OF GOOD WORKS;
MAY YOU DIE AN OLD MAN, FULL OF VIRTUES AND OF DAYS.³⁰

³⁰ Job 42:16.